

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 88USA TODAY
8 October 1986**WILLIAM RINGLE**

Guest columnist

It may be a new word, but it's an old practice

WASHINGTON — "Disinformation" (false news spread with malicious intent, according to *New York Times* etymologist William Safire) has been an English word only 31 years.

It comes from the Russian *dezinformatsia*. Some 15,000 Soviets work on planting false news reports, forging documents, faking news releases by governments, drafting phony letters, and other "active measures," says Roy Godson, co-author of the 1984 book, *Dezinformatsia*. Such efforts are usually directed at discrediting the USA in the Third World.

But, until last week, the common assumption was that the USA had sworn off disinformation. Most of the known past attempts involved fallout in the USA of CIA efforts to influence foreign media. After 1976, Congress ordered a halt to those campaigns with the greatest potential for feedback into the USA, said former CIA director Stansfield Turner.

"A story planted in a newspaper or on a radio broadcast in another country might well be picked up by the AP or UPI and reprinted at home," he said. "Or a book subsidized by the CIA could sell in the United States as well as abroad."

From 1947 to 1967, the CIA published, produced, or sponsored over 1,000 books and operated at least two proprietary news services in Europe that had U.S. subscribers, former agent Ralph McGehee wrote in his book, *Deadly Deceits*.

More than 30 U.S. newspapers subscribed to the larger of the two, according to the report of the Senate Select Committee

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on Intelligence. The CIA also had regular liaison relations with some 50 U.S. journalists or media organizations who published information it provided.

Morton H. Halperin, who had been on the National Security Council staff in the Nixon White House, told of four instances of what he said were CIA "disinformation techniques to influence what appears in the American press."

Although the line becomes blurred, the major distinction between garden-variety government lying — "misinformation" — and "disinformation" is that the former usually isn't with malicious intent.

Most day-to-day deception results from deliberate omission, carelessness, weasel-wording, hyperbole, and hype (like Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger saying at the time of the Libyan raid that damage to civilian targets was "virtually impossible" when, in fact, some had been hit, or President Reagan saying Marines were "standing firm" after they were pulled off the Lebanese shore), or some individual's view of what's good for the nation (like the long cover-up of the enormity of the faulty work, cost overruns, and deception on the early Trident submarines). When reporters asked, on the eve of the Grenada invasion, if an invasion were imminent, White House press spokesmen replied — as they'd been advised to do — "Absolutely not," "Preposterous," and "Knock it down hard."